

Surging Hawks ready for No.2 Ankeny

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Prairie softball team became an overnight sensation last Tuesday when it stunned fourth-ranked Pleasant Valley, 3-2, for a cherished spot in the Class 5A state tournament this week in Fort Dodge.

The Prairie community has embraced the Hawks with open arms.

"It's been crazy," said pitcher Katie Kuch. "It's blown up social media and everyone has been talking about it."

The acclaim may have come overnight for the team, but the hard work and dedication took five long years for the fifth-year seniors on the club.

Kuch, catcher Aly O'Brian and center fielder Brittney Lash began playing for the varsity softball team as eighth graders way back in 2009. Now graduated seniors, they've enjoyed the fruits of their labor.

"It's awesome, seeing where we started and where we've come in five years," said Lash, a .326 hitter in the leadoff spot. "We realized we had the talent all along. We just needed to put it all together. We're all really excited to end our senior years this way."

Prairie compiled an 18-18 record in 2009 and upset top-ranked Linn-Mar along the way that season, but the Hawks finished 10-18 in 2010, 13-24 in 2011 and 8-28 last year. They've rebounded with a 28-14 mark so far this season under first-year coach Joe Yegge, who is also the successful softball coach at Kirkwood Community College.

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Prairie will face second-ranked Ankeny (32-10) in the first round of the state tournament Tuesday at 5 p.m. in Fort Dodge. Ankeny is the defending state champion and the No.1 seed in this year's event.

Prairie enters as the No.8 seed in the eight-team field, making Ankeny a heavy favorite to beat the Hawks Tuesday. On the other hand, Pleasant Valley was a heavy favorite to defeat Prairie in the regional finals last week.

"We know it's going to be a tough game, but we beat them in spring ball, so that kind of helped our confidence," said Lash. "We beat them 5 to zero, so we'll just kind of go from there and play it like we have been. We're kind of on fire, so I think we should be fine."

Kuch has compiled a 21-7 record and 2.15 ERA this season, with 111 strikeouts in 182 1/3 innings. She does not overpower hitters, but moves the ball around and keeps batters off-balance with an assortment of pitches.

"I want to do the same thing I did against Pleasant Valley, just come in and hit my spots," she said. "I know Ankeny has a good lineup, but we've proven we can beat a potent offense with Pleasant Valley."

"I'm just going to come in with the same game plan. I know there will be a ton of people watching. I'm just going to relax and throw the game I always throw."

Prairie will be making its first appearance in the state tournament in school history. The Hawks have come a long way after compiling a 49-88 record the previous four years.

"We never really doubted ourselves," said O'Brian, who has caught every inning of every game this season. "We've always had fun being together and just working hard."

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"Like last year, we won only eight games and in the first round (of regionals) we upset Waterloo East. There was never any doubt. We've always believed in ourselves. It's just finally come around this year."

The Hawks figured they had the talent for a winning ballclub this year. Yegge and the new coaching staff helped it emerge.

"Coming into this season knowing that Joe was our coach, we kind of had a different approach. But we've always had that talent," said Lash. "All the girls have been with us the last three or four years. We finally got the confidence to put it all together."

The Hawks have enjoyed themselves this year. They competed for the Mississippi Valley Conference title and have enjoyed the ride.

"This team is a lot closer than we have been with teams in the past," said O'Brian. "We have a better and sounder chemistry than we had in previous years. It's really helped us this year in the way we play and the way we are when we are around each other."

One of the strongest bonds is between Kuhn, the star pitcher, and O'Brian, her rock-solid catcher. There was a TV comedy in the 1980's called "Kate & Allie," starring Susan Saint James and Jane Curtin. Now there's the "Katie & Aly" Show for the Hawks.

"She knows me so well," said Kuch. "She knows how my pitches move and how they work. She works with me in the offseason, too."

"She's been catching me since we were in the 7th or 8th grade. We've worked together for a long time. That really helps."

"It's great," said Kuch. "If I start struggling, she knows when to come out and what to say. It's awesome to have one of your best friends as a catcher."

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Kuch and O'Brian will take their friendship to Wartburg College this year as members of the softball team there. Lash plans to play for Yegge at Kirkwood.

They've all got one more assignment before ending their high school careers. It will happen at Harlan Rogers Park in Fort Dodge, on the biggest stage of their lives.

"It's going to be crazy," said O'Brian. "I don't know about these guys, but I used to go watch it when I was little, and it was just so cool to see the teams out there and all the people that are watching it.

"It's going to be crazy. It's going to be awesome."

It took Kuch, O'Brian and Lash five years to become "overnight" sensations at Prairie. They've helped established a legacy for the future.

"We're going out with a bang," said Kuch.